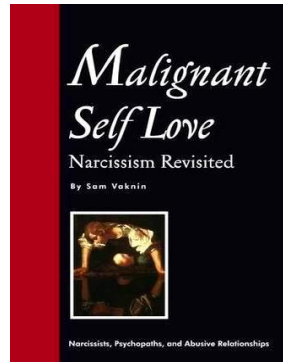


Women in Transition in Eastern and central Europe

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December 11, 2002

The European Monitoring Center on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC) warned yesterday against a rising tide of anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim views in the European Union in the wake of the September 11 atrocities in the United States. The report states that the main victims of this resurgent racial prejudice are women wearing traditional headscarves.

This is merely the latest in an uninterrupted tradition of victimization.

Last month, Donna Hughes from the University of Long Island, published a damning overview of Russian prostitution. She described the work of the Angel

Coalition of non-governmental organizations trying to save women and girls in Russia and other former Soviet republics from human trafficking and subsequent sexual slavery.

Tens of thousands of young females from Moldova, Belarus, Ukraine, Albania, Macedonia, Bulgaria and a host of other erstwhile communist countries, suffer this fate every year. Lured by promises of work or marriage, they are smuggled to the Persian Gulf, to Russia and to western Europe by organized crime gangs in cahoots with local politicians. Tellingly, many former communist countries, Russia foremost, have no laws against these practices.

AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases among women sex workers are rampant. They are the main conduit of infection of heterosexuals and neonates in these societies. A policy forum hosted by the State Department in August 2000 recommended to "decriminalize prostitution and redefine it as 'sex work' — i.e., a form of labor ... Since 'migrating sex workers are simply responding to a demand for their labor', migration laws should be reformed to accommodate their transnational travel. Prostitution in foreign countries was described as potentially 'empowering' for women because it would enable them to migrate to other countries and to achieve 'greater economic independency and autonomy from men."

The Angel Coalition rejects this counsel: "Legalization of prostitution would ruin this country. Russian women have suffered enough exploitation. They do not deserve to become the (prostitutes) of the world." According to the Vienna-based International Organization for Migration, more than half a million women from east Europe serve as sex workers in the West.

The Economist remarked wryly in August 2000: "(In)... the brothels off Wenceslas Square, in central Prague, (where) sexual intercourse can be bought for USD 25 - about half the price charged at a German brothel... Slav women have supplanted Filipinos and Thais as the most common foreign offering in (Europe)."

Yet, grave as they are, these transgressions against the 200 million women and girls in the 27 countries in transition are the least of their concerns. Elena Kotchkina from the Moscow Centre for Gender Studies, wrote this in the "Report on the Legal Status of Women in Russia":

"The high level of unemployment among women, segregation in the labour market, the increasing salary gap between women and men, the lack of women present at the decision making level, increasing violence against women, the high levels of maternal and infant mortality, the total absence of a contraceptive industry in Russia, the insufficiency of child welfare benefits, the lack of adequate resources to fund current state programs - this is only part of the long list of women's rights violations."

The mythology of the left in Europe, well into the 1980s, postulated that communism may have been tough on men but a Shangri-la for women. Actually it was a gender-neutral hell. Feminine participation in the labor force was, indeed, encouraged. Amenities such as day care centers, kindergarten, daylong schools and abortion clinics were common, except in Poland.

Women were allotted quotas in all governance levels, from parliament down, though the upper echelons remained unwaveringly and invariably male-dominated. March 8 - a cross between Valentine's Day and a matriarchal May 1 - is still celebrated throughout the region with great official fanfare.

But this magnanimous gender equality was a mere simulacrum. Women were not allowed to work night time or shifts or in certain jobs, nor were they paid as much as men in equal functions. By the demise of communism in 1989, more than 90 professions in Poland were found to be women-free, probably by design.

Women were quashed by the "triple burden" of obligatory employment, marital and childrearing chores and inescapable party activism. According to surveys quoted by UNESCO, women worked, on average, 15 weekly hours more than their male counterparts. Communism had use only for "super-women", Ninotchka-like, communist bluestockings. Yet, "it is difficult to carry three watermelons under one arm" - goes a Bulgarian proverb.

Thus, the Marxist revolution did not extend to "kitchen, children, church". The woman's traditional domestic roles within a largely patriarchal family remained intact. "Scientific Marxism" made limited headway only in urban centers like Moscow. Folk wisdom reflected these tensions between dogma and reality. "The woman is the neck that moves the head, her husband", went the old adage. Czech men often referred to themselves self-deprecatingly as "underslippers". But male prominence and statal patriarchy prevailed.

Unemployment - officially non-existent in the communist utopia - was ignored. So were drugs, AIDS and battered women. The legal infrastructure left by communism was incompatible with a modern market economy. While maternal leave was an impossibly generous 18 to 36 months - there were no laws against domestic or spousal violence, women trafficking, organized crime prostitution rings, discrimination, inequality, marital rape, date rape and a host of other issues.

No medium (print or electronic) catered to the idiosyncratic needs of women. Academic gender studies programs, or women's studies departments were unheard of. According to Slavenka Drakulic, author of "Cafe Europa" and "How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed", no factories in the region manufactured tampons or sanitary bandages.

Women, who formed an integral and important part of national and social movements throughout the region, were later shunned and marginalized. They felt betrayed and exploited. Disenchanted and disillusioned, they voted overwhelmingly for right wing parties ever since. They conservatively reverted to the safe values, mores and petite bourgeois aspirations of the 19th century.

Writing in the July 2001 *World & I*, Christine Weiss described the situation in Slovakia:

"Slovakia is similar to many other countries in central and eastern Europe in its attitudes toward women and their role in society. Officially equal to men under communism and given equal government representation by law, women nevertheless carried the greater burden of domestic duties and were not given decision-making positions. Women's involvement in politics and political parties has decreased drastically in the last decade. Most Slovak women agree with the official myth that they are 'equal' to men, making it difficult for them to seek help with issues such as protection against domestic violence, employment discrimination, and inadequate health care.

The worsening economic situation has placed a greater burden on women since 1990. Increasingly, there is an out-migration of men to larger towns, more prosperous regions, or other countries for work. This heightens the domestic burden on women; the help they got from husbands, sons, or other relatives is now largely removed. The economic slump has also forced women to increase food production from the family plots."

Feminism failed to take root in pragmatic central and east Europe. It was too ideological, often Marxist, too extreme, family-disparaging and man-hating. Petr Prihoda offered the male point of view in the Czech-English monthly *New Presence*: "I'm also wary of the revolutionary ambition of some feminist texts, with their ideas about changing present conditions, having seen enough attempted utopias for one lifetime."

Czech women tend to agree. "We myself...and many others are not in search of global sisterhood at all, and it is only when we give up expecting it that we can get anywhere." - says Jirina Siklova from the Gender Studies Center in Prague - "It is each other's very 'otherness' that motivates us, and the things we find in common take on greater meaning within the context of otherness. There is so much to learn by comparing the ways in which we are different, and which the same elements of women's experience are global, and which aren't, and wondering why, and what it means."

Capitalism has improved the lot of women in some countries - and considerably worsened it in others. According to Elizabeth Brainerd of Harvard University, writing in the October 2000 issue of the *Industrial & Labor Relations Review*:

"Under state socialism, women fared relatively well in the labor market: female-male wage differentials were similar to those in the West, and female labor force participation rates were among the highest in the world. Since the introduction of market reforms (there is) a consistent increase in female relative wages across Eastern Europe, and a substantial decline in female relative wages in Russia and Ukraine. Women in the latter countries have been penalized by the tremendous widening of the wage distribution in those countries. Increased wage inequality in Eastern Europe has also depressed female relative wages, but these losses have been more than offset by gains in rewards to observed skills and by an apparent decline in discrimination against women."

All in all, transition was not good to women. The privatization of state-owned enterprises was dominated by a male nomenclature of managers and insiders. Technological modernization was both male-driven and male-biased. Men in central and eastern Europe are still three times as likely as women to find a job. Between three and four fifths of all women's - mostly menial - jobs were lost, notably in the industrial sectors, especially in textile and clothing.

According to the February 2000 issue of the UNESCO Courier, 14 million of the 26 million jobs that vanished in eastern Europe since 1989 were women's. Unemployment among women is 5 percentage points higher than among men. Two years ago, the inter-gender gap in pay in Russia was 24 percent. It was over 15 percent in both Poland and Hungary.

In all the countries in transition, the highest rates of unemployment are among middle aged and older women. Three quarters of the unemployed are women. The Ukrainians call it "unemployment with a female face". Women go unrecorded both when employed and when unemployed - thus deprived of social benefits, health and unemployment insurance and labor-related legal rights.

When trained, women are relegated to clerical, low-skilled and low-paying jobs. Men are assigned to assimilate new and lucrative technologies. In some countries, women are asked by prospective employers to waive their rights, to produce a medical certificate confirming non-pregnancy, or, more rarely, to provide proof of sterilization prior to gaining employment.

Even in higher education, where women's participation has gradually increased - they are confined to "feminine" - i.e., low pay and low status - occupations. Vocational and technical schools are either defunct or do not welcome women. The rising cost of tertiary schooling threatens to dampen women's educational opportunities. Even in feminized professions (such as university teaching), women make less than 20% of the upper rungs (e.g., full professorships).

The very ethos of society has adversely changed. Resurgent nostalgic nationalism, neo traditionalism and religious revival seek to confine them to home and hearth.

Negative demographic trends - declining life expectancy and birth rate, numerous abortions, late marriage, a high divorce rate and an increasing suicide rate - provoke a nagging sensation of "we are a dying nation" and the inevitable re-emphasis of the woman's reproductive functions. Hence the fierce debates about the morality of abortion in Catholic Poland, in Lithuania, Slovenia and even in the agnostic Czech Republic.

Many women believe that capitalism is for men, emphasizing, as it does, masculine traits, such as aggressiveness, assertiveness, and competition. Women political representation shriveled since 1989 when rubber stamp parliaments were transformed into loci of real power.

The few women that did make it are typically relegated to "soft" committees which deal with budget-poor social issues. There is a dearth of women among business executives of medium and large enterprises, or the owners of privatized enterprises. Job advertising is sex-specific and sexist to this very day.

Pay regulations and tax system are skewed in favor of male employees. Child benefits were all but eliminated, maternal leave shortened, affordable day care facilities rendered extinct by massive cuts in social outlays. The quality of social benefits not yet axed has deteriorated, access to them has been restricted and supplies are often short.

The costs of public goods, mainly health and education, have been transferred from state to households either officially, once services have been commercialized, or surreptitiously and insidiously (e.g., patients required to purchase their own food, bed sheets and medication when hospitalized).

The swift deterioration in the quality of the region's health systems and the proscription, in certain countries, of the only effective form of contraception - abortions - led to an upsurge in maternal mortality and teenage pregnancy. The curtailing or absence of sex education yielded an epidemic of sexually transmitted diseases. Rape, spousal abuse, date rape, street prostitution, begging, especially by destitute widows - are common phenomena. Divorce maintenance payments are often both pitiful and delinquent.

A generational abyss opened between young women and their older sisters. The post-communist generations are conspicuous consumers, car owners, and career opportunists. They aspire to be managers, shareholders, politicians and professionals. The older ones, exhausted by decades of social turmoil and futile activism, prefer to stay at home, in relative tranquility, tinged with benign dependence.

Yet, neither fare well. East European pseudo-yuppies lack business skills, knowledge, contacts, supportive infrastructure, or access to credit. Older women

cannot work long hours, lack skills and, when officially employed, are expensive, due to the burden of their social benefits. Consequently, women mostly migrate to services, light industry and agriculture - the less lucrative sectors of the dilapidated economies of their homelands.

As far as women as concerned, the brave, new world of liberal democracy is old, patriarchal, discriminatory and iniquitous. This may yet prove to be transition's worst failure.

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